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REMEMBERING ELIOT DEUTSCH

Eliot Deutsch and the Aesthetic Turn

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The life of Eliot Deutsch lies at the center of the comparative philosophy movement over the past two generations. In many ways, his biography is deeply embedded in a story he, in important measure, helped to write within the corridors of the Philosophy Department at the University of Hawai'i.

The first chapter of this story begins with his precursors, Charles A. Moore and Wing-tsit Chan who in the 1930s, with the support of their then president, Gregg Sinclair, shared both a vision and a special place. The University of Hawai'i like the community it served was coming of age, and was marked by an extraordinary diversity of languages and cultures. With a student body of over 70 percent Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders, there was some considerable expectation and motivation for the faculty to provide an inclusive education that would be relevant to the lives of its diverse students.

It was under these conditions that the Philosophy Department from its earliest days was committed to teaching the discipline within the framework of Western philosophy, but with the distinct and singular mission of challenging the self-understanding of professional philosophy that philosophy is an exclusively Anglo-European enterprise. To this end, the department provided access to the texts and languages of the non-Western philosophical traditions of South Asia, China, Korea, and Japan, as well as Buddhist and Islamic philosophies, arguing through both its research agenda and its curriculum that philosophy is an inclusive affair of global proportion.

In 1939 the Philosophy Department hosted the first of the East-West Philosophers' Conferences, bringing to the islands the wise grey heads of East and West to reflect upon and discuss the pressing issues of the day. The first several of these summer conferences convened in 1939, 1949, and 1959 were small and long, expanding over time to include some twenty or thirty philosophers for six weeks of intensive discussion. If the events were modest, they attracted some of the most distinguished minds in world philosophy: William Ernest Hocking, F.S.C. Northrop, D.T. Suzuki,

Eliot Deutsch, 1931–2020.

Hu Shih, S. Radhakrishnan, Thom H. Fang, John Findlay, Hajime Nakamura, Richard McKeon, John E. Smith, Tang Chun-I, T.R.V. Murti, and many more.

Moore and Chan had laid the foundation for an intellectual movement, and their initial vision was indeed a noble one. The goal was to formulate a synthetic world philosophy negotiated out of the best of each tradition by distinguished scholars from around the world to serve as a philosophical charter for world peace and prosperity.

Each of these world congresses produced a volume of papers that recorded the exchanges among the philosophers present, extending the impact of these meetings as resources for further philosophical reflection for decades beyond the conferences themselves. And in 1951, with the same goal of widening the influence of global philosophy, Charlie Moore published the first issue of *Philosophy East and West*, a quarterly journal of comparative philosophy that was over time to become the central voice for the ever-widening community of scholars who would join this revolt within the discipline. It was because of the growing prestige of the conference series, the conference volumes published by the University of Hawai'i Press, the growing reputation of the philosophy department and its faculty as the center for world philosophy, and *Philosophy East and West* as a forum for research in comparative philosophy that in 1960 the then Governor John A. Burns was able to lobby the then Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson to establish the East-West Center in Hawai'i.

Enter Eliot and the beginning of the next chapter. There is a wonderful story that Eliot would tell of how he first met Charlie Moore. In 1963 as a young assistant professor, he had received a fellowship as a Faculty Fellow at the American Institute of Indian Studies in New Delhi, and was doing research on classical Vedanta philosophy. In order to meet many of the leading Indian philosophers of the day, Eliot made his way to Chandigarh in northern India to attend the All-India Philosophy Conference. Charlie Moore had been invited to this conference as a special guest, and at its conclusion, Eliot and Charlie prepared to fly back to Delhi from Chandigarh. Having hitched a ride with the delegation of senior scholars escorting Moore to the airport, Eliot waited with Charlie the usual Indian time for the plane to arrive. Finally, the imminent arrival of the plane was announced over the loudspeaker. But the plane without making the slightest gesture of wanting to land at the small Chandigarh airport, simply flew overhead and on its way. On inquiry, it was discovered that Charlie and Eliot were the only two passengers to have reservations, making it hardly worthwhile for the plane to land—a point quite beyond dispute.

Charlie and Eliot were provided a car and a driver. An otherwise distressing six hours of negotiating an automobile through the clamber and bustle of an Indian landscape that only travelers through India will ever

know was made quite wonderful by the opportunity these two philosophers had to engage in their art. The animated conversation continued through the evening and over breakfast the next day. And three years later Eliot was invited to join the Philosophy Department at the University of Hawai'i from his position at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York, and to succeed Charlie as the Editor of *Philosophy East and West*.

Inheriting the mantel from Moore in 1967, Eliot carried the project of promoting Western literacy on non-Western philosophical traditions into the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. And on his watch, the earlier rather romantic vision of a distilled world philosophy gradually gave way to a rather different project. As a counterweight to the many sins of an unstoppable process of globalization, the search for a unifying sameness was transformed into a celebration of philosophical and cultural differences, differences that once activated could be resourced for evolutionary and hybridic growth.

Charlie Moore had worked hard to build up the subscription base for *Philosophy East and West*, but starting up a new journal for a sub-discipline teetering on the margins of professional philosophy was not easy; in 1967 it was still a cottage industry with only minimal professional and institutional support. Comparative philosophy desperately needed a community.

It was the professional eyes and acumen of the young Deutsch that established *Philosophy East and West* as the voice of comparative philosophy within the Western academy. Over time, with peer-reviewed essays by leading scholars and special topical features that expressed the rich differences distinguishing the various cultural traditions of our world, Eliot attracted and nurtured the shared identity of a community of like-minded experts. It was around *Philosophy East and West* that this community was institutionalized to become the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy (SACP). In 1967 with the assistance of Karl Potter, Richard Robinson, and Hans van Buitenen, Eliot and sixty-eight founding members gathered together to undertake the organizing of SACP. In its more than half a century of existence, the Society has organized hundreds of panels at national meetings of the American Philosophical Association, the Association of Asian Studies, and the American Academy of Religions as well as many international research conferences, and has sponsored its own monograph series initially edited by *Philosophy East and West's* then book review editor, Henry Rosemont.

By the time that Eliot in 1987 decided to step down from his twenty years of editing *Philosophy East and West*, the journal had grown from under 200 mostly individual subscribers to 1200 primarily library subscriptions, and the participating membership of SACP had expanded to include over 400 scholars.

Beginning in 1969, Eliot took on the responsibility of a continuing conference series with smaller meetings on special topics such as law and logic, as well as representative philosophical figures to become topical issues of the journal. The first of these conferences was on "Aesthetics East and West," and included such luminaries as Albert Hofstadter, Stephen Pepper, and Donald Keene. And there was a conference on Wang Yangming on the 500th anniversary of his birth, and again on Martin Heidegger on his 80th birthday. The field of comparative philosophy had by now matured to the point that greater in-depth critical engagement could be carried forward.

Throughout this period, Hung Wo Ching, an enlightened local businessman had taken on the task of raising financial support for these conferences as his business, and he did it very well. In 1987 with the assistance of the perennial Wing-tsit Chan, at this time close to his ninetieth year, and with the steady support of Hung Wo Ching, plans were laid for the next large conference on the theme, "Culture and Modernity." For Eliot, a whole new generation of scholars interested in comparative philosophy had arisen, and the time was now ripe for strengthening the department's continuing tradition, for an upswing in scale, and for real innovation. In 1989 with the convening of this Sixth East-West Philosophers' Conference, 130 scholars came to the Islands from some thirty-three countries, including for the first time the USSR, Africa, and Latin America. These distinguished scholars in their own right joined in conversation with some of America's most prominent representatives: Rorty, Bernstein, Heller, MacIntyre, Putnam, Danto, Outlaw, and many others. Under the wise eyes of Eliot's capable directorship, like so many of his other ventures he had undertaken on behalf of the department, it was nothing less than an historical event.

By now, with the cumulative affect of the thriving graduate program, the conference series, the conference volumes, the journal, and the output of his research productive colleagues, not only had the commonplace that Asian traditions might have something to say about religion but not philosophy been fully discredited, but comparative philosophy with its epicenter at the University of Hawai'i had earned a place at the discipline's table with six of the last eight presidents of the APA joining in the discussion.

And so this conference series continues, with its twelfth iteration being scheduled for May 2021. Scholars of good-will proceed with civility and critical intelligence to contribute what insights they can bring to bear on the pressing issues of our changing times. And *Philosophy East and West* continues, with 2020 marking its seventieth year.

Another chapter in this story has been Eliot's own philosophical career as a motive force in the comparative philosophy movement. The narrative divides into two rather distinct and yet overlapping phases. In his first incarnation, he was a student of Indian philosophy and culture, publishing

translations of the classics and interpretive studies on the high philosophies of South Asia. His translation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (1968), his *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (1969), and his *Source Book on Advaita Vedanta* (with J.A.B. van Buitenen) (1971), belong to this earlier formative period.

Although never really abandoned, this more historical beginning gave way to a sustained creative reflection through which Eliot entered the realm of philosophy proper as a philosopher in his own right. Where these two phases intersect is that the philosopher Eliot Deutsch was a world philosopher drawing heavily upon the broadest range of the human experience: the canons of Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Buddhist, and of course, Western philosophy. In this creative phase, Eliot published book-length comparative studies on metaphysics, aesthetics, truth, freedom, the construction of person, and philosophy of religion.

As a defining signature of his work, Eliot moved away from the familiar centrality of metaphysics and epistemology to consistently take aesthetics as the starting point of his philosophical enterprise. Creativity and personal freedom have been the key values in his vision of the project of becoming consummately human. There is a real sense in which the philosophy of Eliot Deutsch, in a way analogous to several of the Asian traditions from which he has drawn his inspiration, can fairly be described as a philosophical aestheticism.

There is a special space in the Philosophy Department at the University of Hawai'i named for Eliot as the Eliot Deutsch Seminar Room. And in that room along with a complete collection of both Eliot's philosophical oeuvre and of *Philosophy East and West*, graduate student seminars are held daily as the next generation of world philosophers prepare for their own important careers. There is nothing that grateful colleagues who have shared in the life and the vision of this special person could do to remember him better than to continue the tradition he has embodied so well.

The Eliot Deutsch PhD Merit Award has been established by Marcia Roberts-Deutsch to honor the life and work of Eliot Deutsch. A gift to it will support the work of exceptional PhD students at the University of Hawai'i Mānoa Department of Philosophy. Those wishing to honor Eliot in this way may contribute to the award fund through this webpage: <http://www.uhfoundation.org/EliotDeutsch>.